



# COPS Study

Community Oriented Policing Services

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## What are the Newspapers Saying about Community Policing?

Community Policing is still a young reform movement. Many citizens have some idea of what it means, but most form their impressions from what they see and hear in the press.

How much coverage does community policing receive? What issues are covered most often? Is the coverage positive or negative? Answers to these questions tell us about the image of community policing, and they offer a peek at the factors that are shaping the public's expectations about what community policing can accomplish.

The COPS Office has supported a study that provides the first systematic analysis of how community policing is portrayed in 26 major daily newspapers around the nation.

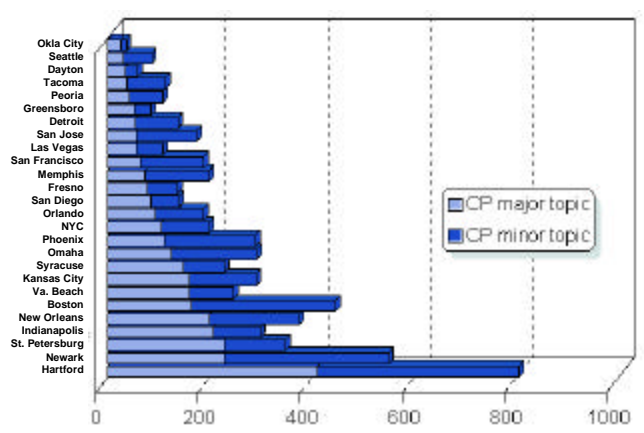
Stephen Mastrofski, a Visiting Fellow at the COPS Office, and professor at Michigan State University, and Richard Ritti of Penn State University recently completed a content analysis of newspapers serving a variety of metropolitan areas with 43 of the nation's 200 largest municipalities.

Using a news clippings service, the researchers selected every story in which "community policing" or "problem oriented policing" appeared from 1993 to 1997. This produced a sample of almost 6,000 stories in which community policing was a topic. Most of their analysis focused on the articles in which community policing was a major theme (the story's central topic or an important topic in the story).

### Community Policing Coverage

The researchers found great variation in the visibility of community policing in the 26 newspapers. Figure 1 shows that the number of stories ranged from as few as 38 in Oklahoma City to as many as 806 in Hartford.

Figure 1. Frequency of Community Policing Stories 1993-1997



Although some of this variation can be attributed to the programs and activities of the police and other government leaders, it appears that much of the diversity is due to the preferences of the local press. For example, in Indianapolis almost 40 percent of the articles were op-ed or news analysis pieces, growing out of the paper's interest in the mayor's program to use community policing as an important element in the center city's revitalization.

An interesting pattern emerged over the six year period in most cities. The frequency of community policing stories rose rapidly between 1993 and 1994, declined significantly the following year, and then rose slowly the subsequent two years. The pattern appears to parallel the emergence of COPS funding programs to promote community policing. It speaks to the important role that national policy can play in promoting the visibility of police reform.

Some cities showed a different pattern. Virginia Beach displayed a steady increase in the number of community policing stories over the six-year period, San Francisco showed a slight but steady decline, and Orlando showed a roller coaster pattern.

## Themes of Community Policing

Community policing is multifaceted, so it is especially important to know what aspects of community policing are most frequently presented in the press.

Figure 2 shows the distribution for stories that provided some detail about community policing. By far the most frequently mentioned topic was "community," including such themes as partnership, cooperation, citizen volunteers, commitment to the neighborhood, and community building and organizing.

Providing more resources (more officers, more time, more visibility, more equipment) and producing real results that affect community problems were ranked next in frequency.

The relatively high frequency of these top three themes suggests that the readers of these newspapers will come to expect that community policing means working more closely with the police, seeing more police and getting more police service, and that this will produce tangible results in reducing problems about which the public cares.

## The Success of Community Policing

Researchers evaluated each story in terms of the overall assessment it offered of community policing. Sixty percent of the stories provided explicit viewpoints on community policing. Figure 3 shows the distribution of those stories. The press's portrayal of community policing is overwhelmingly positive. Eighty-seven percent of the stories offered only a positive portrayal, and an additional 6 percent were mostly positive. Approximately 7 percent of all articles had any negative material.

In general, community policing's public image in the press could not be much brighter.

Readers desiring a copy of the complete report of this study may contact the COPS Office.

Figure 2. Story Topics  
1993-1997

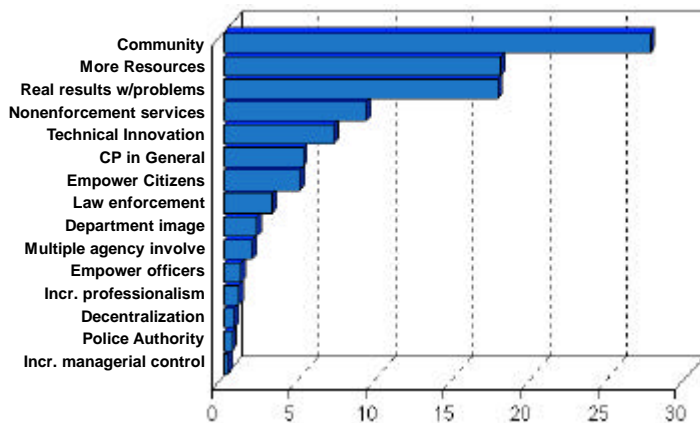


Figure 3. Story's Portrayal of Community Policing

